



NEWS

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USFWS DECIDES NOT TO LIST SWIFT FOX AS THREATENED

Research, Landowner Grants Helping Fox In Texas Panhandle

AMARILLO - A federal government decision to remove the swift fox from the list of candidates for threatened or endangered species status results from two main factors: research in recent years has documented more inhabited fox range than was previously known, and states and private landowners have taken specific action to study and conserve the fox and its shortgrass prairie habitat.

In Texas, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) decision to remove the swift fox from the candidate list was welcome news, as it reflects progress made to learn more about the species and to encourage private ranchers to manage their land in ways that benefit native wildlife of the shortgrass prairie. After years of study, the USFWS concluded that although the swift fox has been reduced across much of its historical range, viable populations currently occur in approximately 40% of those areas formerly occupied. The species also appears to be more adaptable to a wide range of habitat types and more tolerant of modified land uses than previously believed.

"I commend the efforts led by the states to address the status of the swift fox," said Ralph Morgenweck, director of the USFWS mountain-prairie region. "Neither the Service nor the States want to see species placed on the endangered list, as each new listing represents a wildlife conservation failure. The challenge now is to continue working together, get ahead of the curve, identify species in trouble, and put ecosystems in working order before the situation leads to an endangered species listing."

Since 1997, Texas Parks and Wildlife, the USFWS and private landowners have funded seven Panhandle region projects totaling more than \$140,000 to conserve native

wildlife and habitat. Landowners ante up cash and in kind contributions to fund a percentage of the projects and in return receive larger sums as grants. Through the TPW Landowner Incentive Program and the USFWS Partners for Wildlife program, these grants encourage ranchers to undertake native prairie and wetlands restoration, rotational and cellular cattle grazing regimes, research and monitoring and other action on their land to aid the swift fox, lesser prairie chicken, black-tailed prairie dog, and other species of shortgrass prairie wildlife.

“Rare species and habitat conservation in Texas can only succeed with cooperation from private landowners, since 97 percent of our state landscape is privately owned,” said Andrew Sansom, TPW executive director. “The rural landowners of Texas have the habitat and most of them are good stewards of natural resources. Our job is to assist with practical and financially viable options for them to conserve resources in their care.”

In the wake of the USFWS decision not to list the swift fox, Texas scientists and landowners and their counterparts in other states hope to step up prairie conservation efforts. For the past six years, an interstate team of scientists within the swift fox’s historic range in 10 U.S. states and the state of Alberta, Canada have been sharing information and coordinating conservation work. Similar interstate groups are focused on the lesser prairie chicken and black-tailed prairie dog. The main point of all efforts is to protect what remains of the vast prairies that once covered the central U.S. and to actively restore prairie habitat whenever possible, as this helps not only rare species, but large numbers of other wildlife.

“We are bound by agreement of the Swift Fox Conservation Committee to keep working to conserve the species,” said Dr. Robert Sullivan, TPW biologist in Canyon. “If we don’t, we’ll eventually be right back to square one. We have to follow through on the plan, and we’re really only half way there. This effort will make sure the species isn’t jeopardized in the future.”

In recent years, Sullivan and research colleagues at Texas Tech University have captured and placed radio-tracking collars on close to 50 swift foxes in the Texas Panhandle. This allows biologists to study the shy, nocturnal creature, observing their pup rearing, eating, geographic range and other habits. A key factor under study is coyotes, which eat swift foxes. Sullivan has proposed more extensive fox research in

areas where coyotes are controlled and areas where coyotes are not controlled. He is also working with several landowners, and wants to translate years of scientific research into practical guidelines that could be used by willing farmers and ranchers.

At the Arrington Ranch in Hemphill County, Mike Arrington and his father George are working to enhance about 1,200 acres of prairie on their 5,400-acre ranch. Their \$57,807 conservation project is funded mainly by TPW and USFWS, but the Arringtons are also putting in several thousand dollars worth of cash and labor. They are restoring and enhancing upland prairie springs and riparian (wet) zones such as cottonwood bottoms along the Wasatch River. They are also removing undesirable exotic plant species such as salt cedar and Russian olive from river bottomlands. The main family businesses are cattle and oil and gas, but they have a significant nature tourism operation involving hunting and birdwatching. As an interesting aside, actor Tom Hanks was at the ranch in March and May 2000 during filming of inland scenes for the movie *Castaway*.

“We’re trying to increase our wildlife,” said Mike Arrington, whose family has owned the land for five generations. “Our prairie chicken numbers are not as high as in the past. I talked to Texas Parks and Wildlife and they said if we added some additional water and cross fencing and rotated our cattle, we could add nesting area for the prairie chicken and increase bird numbers. We think there are people who would want to come stay in our bed and breakfast and see the birds do their mating dance. So we’re doing it for tourism, and also because we want the native animals that are here to remain here.”

At the Shaller Ranch in Donley County, Ted Shaller is doing similar prairie restoration work on about 3,000 acres, distributing water and rotating cattle grazing in ways that improve his cattle operation efficiency and help the lesser prairie chicken and its prairie habitat. By continuously moving cattle around to allow sections of ranch grass to rest and recover, the native grasses grow better for cattle, better retain rainwater and provide taller cover for prairie chickens.

For information on landowner assistance in the Panhandle region, landowners may contact the TPW Wildlife Division regional office in Canyon at 806-655-3782. For information on LIP grants, free technical guidance and other programs, landowners anywhere in Texas may phone toll free to TPW in Austin at 800-791-1112, option 5 for Wildlife, then option 1 for Wildlife Information.

